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SPECIAL ANALYSIS

POLAND: Jaruzelski's Economic Measures

Premier Jaruzelski is turning his attention to rebuilding the economy, now that overt resistance to martial law has been at least temporarily suppressed. Despite the negative impact of martial law on the attitudes of the workers, his program may lead to some stabilization in the retail market and to increased production in some sectors in the short run. Prospects for implementing effective economic reforms and policies are poor, however, and Poland's basic economic problems are likely to continue. This, coupled with austerity, will leave the people with the same economic grievances that contributed to the events of August 1980.

Financial problems will remain a serious obstacle to economic recovery. Western creditors are not likely to restore Poland's credit until its debt payments are rescheduled. Warsaw needs to demonstrate that it can pay at least the interest on past credits and to show some progress toward a sustained economic revival and toward political stability.

The regime has taken advantage of the martial law period to schedule 300- to 400-percent increases in retail prices for a wide range of food items and for domestic utilities. These increases are to be offset by wage adjustments only for low income earners. They are needed to absorb the excess purchasing power in the hands of the population and thereby reduce shortages by discouraging hoarding and speculation.

If shortages are reduced, farmers might then be more willing to sell their production to the state because there would be more goods for them to buy. The price increases, however, will lead to a drastic decline in the purchasing power of the population and, if savings accounts are not adjusted for inflation, to a sharp decline in the real value of personal savings.

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The martial law regime so far has not won the confidence of the farmers, which will be necessary if food supplies are to be increased. Although the regime has not vetoed any pending liberalization changes in agricultural policy, it has threatened to force deliveries of food. This would increase food supplies to only a limited extent because some private farmers are likely to react by killing their livestock and destroying their crops.

The recent resumption of a six-day workweek in the mines and other key industries probably will lead to some increases in production, although the lack of Western food, raw materials, spare parts, and equipment will be important constraints. Even though the regime has suggested that working hours may be reduced to previous standards once martial law is lifted, it probably will be unwilling to risk losing the added production.

Coal output has already jumped substantially, according to official data. If this trend is real, and if it continues, coal production this year may reach 180 million tons, compared with the target of 168 million tons prior to the imposition of martial law.

Popular Resentment

The austerity measures are extremely unpopular and are virtually eliminating any government hopes of winning worker support and of discrediting Solidarity. Workers will remember that Solidarity attached stringent conditions to a general retail price hike and refused repeated government attempts to restore the six-day workweek.

The government can hope that initial resentment may be reduced if its policies make goods more available and shopping more convenient. Authorities recognize that the price issue is an explosive one, however, and martial law controls are likely to be extended beyond the date of the price increases.

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Reforms of the Economic System

Martial law has greatly reduced the prospects for basic economic reform. The government had already postponed the effective date of many reforms even before martial law. Far-reaching worker self-management is a dead issue and other measures are likely to be scaled down.

A Council of Ministers decree on 30 December further impaired planned reforms by giving branch ministries a role again in imposing "production tasks" on enterprises and by increasing the number of industrial sectors where central control will be maintained. The government is following through on the plans for wholesale price reform and for devaluation of the zloty, but those measures will be largely ineffective unless the economy is decentralized.

Familiar Responses

Jaruzelski is likely in the short run to steer the economy rather than rely on unfamiliar economic instruments and forces. His government will find it difficult to accept decentralization of decisionmaking, reduced central planning, and use of such market mechanisms as prices, interest rates, taxes, and profits to guide the economy.

In the longer run, despite the apparently strong desire of the leadership to avoid the failings of the old economic system, the regime is likely to repeat the experiments of the 1960s and 1970s, when bureaucratic and party elements first limited the extent of the reforms of those years and eventually regained nearly total control of the economy.

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